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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that examined successful high school principals' strategies for implementing school improvement visions are presented in this paper. Methodology involved case studies of four Georgia high school principals with reputations for effective school improvement. Interviews were conducted with the principals and 10 teachers from each school. Findings indicate that: (1) principals' visions developed and evolved as products of their organizational contexts; and (2) the principals operated autonomously from the central office by using networks rather than hierarchical authority lines. The new paradigm illustrated by these principals challenges the traditional assumptions of hierarchy and goal setting at the macro-level. Although individual visions were site-specific, the implementation processes were similar--the principals recognized the interrelated processes of curricula needs assessment, resource procurement, and encouraging teachers to act as "entrepreneurial program managers." These tools can be used as criteria for principal recruitment, selection, and preparation. (Contains 19 references.) (LMI)

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Using School-Site, Contextual Research:
Contributions to a New EA Paradigm

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What we find is that . . . someone created a new set of rules. The decentralization trend is an excellent example of a paradigm shift. The old rules, the old game, was 'centralize the organization and make the hierarchy complex.' But someone discovered that there was a different way to deal with problems, which was to decentralize the organization; in other words, to change the rules. And the result was a paradigm shift. (Barker, pp. 15-16)

Education administration (EA) theorists and researchers are searching for a new paradigm. Our faith in a positivistic science of educational administration has largely unraveled (Cibulka, Mawhinney, & Paquette, 1991). The rational-bureaucratic and hierarchical structure, with its emphases on accountability, efficiency, and outcomes, is largely ineffective because decision making largely operates in an unpredictable environment with multiple and competing goals.

In this paper, a principalship study (Keedy, 1991) will be used to challenge one hierarchical dimension of our traditional paradigm: that successful principals are middle-management cogs carrying out orders, or relying on the support and political backing, from superintendents and central office supervisors. The two areas of investigation for this paper are: 1) How did four successful principals conceptualize their school improvement visions?; and 2) What were the roles of the central office personnel (including the superintendents) as these principals implemented their visions? Organization context was interpreted as creating school improvement opportunities as these four principals developed and implemented site-specific visions largely autonomous from their central offices. Implications then are made for principal recruitment/selection and preparation. To provide a conceptual frame for this paper, traditional EA assumptions first will be contrasted

with an emerging perspective.

Traditional EA Assumptions

Three traditional governing assumptions have been: 1) bureaucracy and hierarchy are necessary; 2) accountability is vested in designated leaders; and 3) goal-based planning at the macro-level and monitoring of activity at the local level are relevant processes (Astuto, Clark, & Polen, 1991). Taylor's scientific job analysis and functional supervising, Weber's bureaucratic efficiency, and Simon's rational decision-making models are key contributions to the hierarchical, techno-rational EA paradigm.

This traditional paradigm has been challenged before the 1990s. Weick's (1982) loosely-coupled organizations and Berman and McLaughlin's (1978) mutual adaptation are well-known examples. The perceived failure of the state-mandated reform movement of the 1980s, however, may have sealed this paradigm's fate. Despite warnings from renowned school observers like Arthur Wise (1988) that legislated learning would not work, pro-education governors and key legislators enacted countless reforms intended to straighten out public education from state capitols. State education agency personnel dutifully cranked out the regulations that superintendents, local boards, and central office personnel passed down as memoranda to principals who passed them down to teachers. Student achievement since the mid 1980s, however, has not been overly impressive (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1989).

New Assumptions about Education Administration

New assumptions about schooling challenge rational decision making and the Planning-Programming-Budgeting System (PPBS) and Program Evaluation and Review Technique (PERT). In the emerging perspective, education administration

operates within an ambiguous environment of competing forces. Top-down orders and mandates are interpreted by organization players at various levels according to individual dispositions and local circumstances. Decision-making is interactive (negotiated among actors), situational, and contextual. Administrators and teachers interpret federal, state, and even district mandates to accommodate their situations--despite what appears on annual accountability reports. Whereas rational models of organization adopt goals as primary units of control, challengers emphasize other factors shaping organization behavior, such as "situational imperatives, peer expectations, prior experiences, and professional norms" (Sykes, 1990, p. 349).

Methodology and Data Sources

Methodology for this study, "School Improvement Agendas and Practices of Successful High School Principals" consisted of four interpretive case studies as field investigation (Erickson, 1986). Emerging theories from each case were grounded in the data themselves (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Abstractions were constructed (inductively) among the four cases and compared with findings from other studies (forming analytic generalizations).

Based on their reputed contributions to improving their schools, Georgia principals were nominated by super-intendants, SEA officials, and EA professors. Selection criteria included substantially improved student outcomes during their tenures. These principals were each interviewed five times to collect data on principal mission, vision, and school context, which were synthesized into the school improvement agendas. Also, each principal and ten teachers from each school (n=10) were asked the open-ended question, "How did you [to the principal] or your principal [to the teacher informants] improve this school?" Principal

responses were analyzed as emerging themes; teacher responses were categorized by common characteristic. (Interrater agreements of categorization generated by a panel of experts--four EA professors--averaged .80.) These two data sources were compared for congruency ("goodness of fit"). In this paper teacher interview data were used to complement principal strategies--providing richer texture for the case studies.

Case Study Analyses

Each principal's case study is discussed in this order: 1) development of vision; 2) strategies and tactics used to implement this vision; and 3) the principal's relationship with the central office as the vision was implemented. Vision was defined as an image of a desirable future (Manasse, 1985) and creating a compelling focus for organization members (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

Principal Burke

Burke knew he had to revamp Nottingham High's (NHS) curriculum to convince parents that NHS was once again an academic school of excellence and that their children could get accepted to schools of their choice --his vision. (Pseudonyms were used in this study). In the mid 1980s he jumped at the chance of making NHS the district magnet school for math and science, and pushed "downtown" officials until he got what he wanted. He also discovered that more academically ambitious students push teachers and programs. Once enough college-oriented students starting attending NHS, academic programs would have to improve (through student and parent pressures)--provided he could find the resources from "downtown" and from external sources.

Tactically, Burke developed a unique blend of opportunism, rapport with certain teachers (partly through maintaining an open door policy), and the perspicacity to

visualize specific curriculum needs. Out of this leadership mix, several key teachers became entrepreneurial program managers who started the robotics programs, fourteen advanced placement courses, and a college advisement program. In the latter program the director and Burke met with ninth graders and their parents in the early fall to begin planning for college admission. He collaborated with real estate brokers to attract certain parents to the NHS attendance zone. He called in his "chips" to local contractors and built a new football practice field and track on his own.

Burke's relationship with his central office was often adversarial. The associate and assistant superintendents resented Burke because he would push to get the resources he wanted--often at the expense of denying those same resources to other principals. "He seemed to know the game and what buttons to push. He's a stubborn mule when it comes to resources 'downtown'. When it comes to a particular program, he'll go right up to the superintendent /over his subordinates' heads/ to get it" (interview with Teacher No. 9). Burke also caused problems at the central office because his high school's students consistently out-performed the other schools. Other principals constantly were undermining him through central office administrators. The superintendent, however, had little choice but to comply with his requests. Otherwise he would have to deal with angry parents district-wide who were proud that Nottingham High once again had the reputation of an outstanding college-preparatory school. When he was unable to obtain resources for new instructional programs, Burke and colleagues wrote funded grants (e.g., a current grant providing monies to use business and industry work sites for his vocational program).

Principal Brown

Brown used administrative fiat to get control of the school. He realized, however, that Monroe County High School (MCHS) would never improve substantially unless his teachers shared in decisions affecting their workplace and meeting student needs. The MCHS staff needed a shared governance structure (SGS): a general framework capable of accommodating all issues and preventing people from going in all directions (his vision). Brown had several contextual advantages useful in implementing his shared governance structure: the values of a conservative rural community school where students were expected to behave their teachers; the school's location near a large university providing ambitious and change-oriented teachers and invaluable resources (e.g., staff development, shared decision-making facilitation, advice on grant writing). Brown capitalized on these advantages as he implemented his vision.

He established a partnership with the nearby university; professors from the college of education provided staff development in working with at-risk students and the facilitative support for implementing the SGS. His sense of vision helped him make some crucial decisions regarding how far to intervene, when to provide resources, and when to let SGS players learn from their mistakes. As Brown gradually gave up power to the shared decision-making gameplayers, teachers started making more decisions and were willing to be more responsible for the consequences of those decisions. Brown then became involved in a curriculum project sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science and spent the summers of 1989 and 1990 at month-long workshops. His role largely had changed from manager to contributing expert in curriculum.

Brown's superintendent had offered him the principalship three times before Brown finally accepted it only on the condition of autonomy from the

superintendent "to shape his own school". Despite this promise, Brown encountered political and financial support problems. One board member used a stopwatch to monitor corridor passing time because he had heard community complaints that the new principal was an "autocrat".

Through the SGS, several task forces were established to improve MCHS's curriculum and instruction. Brown knew he had to meet the financial and professional needs of these task forces or the SGS would wither on the vine. Although Brown was more successful in obtaining additional materials and supplies from his board than his predecessor, Brown received much of his support from external sources, e.g., a grant from Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. (The superintendent, according to Brown, preferred to raise the local property tax, but was opposed by a conservative board which wanted to keep the mileage down.)

Principal Jackson

Jackson conceptualized two visions. He first envisioned that he had to spend as much time as possible with students for whom high school might be their best chance to set a pattern of success in life. (Contextually, Jackson was influenced by the changing demographics at Carmichael High School, about 70% minority by the time of this study). Strategically, Jackson functioned as a student advocate, disciplinarian, and counselor. A vision-related goal was that all seniors would graduate with firm vocational plans; he was observed by the researcher asking several students what their plans were. He accomplished this vision largely by meeting with students (individually and in small groups) and by using a simple but effective expectations-and-consequences model.

By meeting with students and teachers, he soon set the norm that due process was crucial to maintaining a democratic society: CHS would prepare students for

participation in a democratic society. He also established groups of teachers and students to assess the school's curriculum and establish six curricula levels (meeting different student needs). In establishing his reputation as a student advocate, Jackson discovered that the three-member guidance department was not meeting student needs of the 1980s (guidance in drug use, sex, and career counseling; dealing with parents and students with conflicting values). Jackson unilaterally replaced these members and hired a new director sharing a similar student-orientation.

Jackson later realized that his Type A personality minimized the consensus building and different perspectives needed to continue meeting student needs (his second vision). In changing his management style from essentially autocratic to situational and participatory, he doubled the size of his Leadership Council. More Council members meant more perspectives to solving problems. The new participatory management style freed Jackson up to spend more time and energy with students as a role model and advocate.

At only one point during the five interviews with Jackson did he mention support of any kind from his district office. (A new superintendent let it be known that monies were available for at-risk programs, and Jackson used this district money for curriculum development.) When the researcher asked Jackson how he become principal at CHS, Jackson responded (guardedly): "I was chosen by the superintendent to lead this school." Jackson often worked around "downtown" to find the superior teachers with the "right cultural fit" for CHS (Teacher No. 3).

Several teacher participants did mention Jackson's ability to get needed resources (Teacher No. 6: "He was a good politician 'downtown'"). Jackson, however, also was successful in attracting school improvement grants from the private and public sectors, e.g., collaboration with the National Academy of Finance--Teacher No. 1.) No evidence was collected to interpret that Jackson accomplished his visions with

hands-on, active support from his central office (e.g., weekly or daily contact with his superiors). Jackson apparently accomplished his visions on his own primarily from his ability to work well with people (particularly students) and understand his staff's individual professional strengths. He had a strong self-concept and was not afraid to surround himself with competent people.

Principal Lee

Lee envisioned that he had to market Wells High School (WHS) to an upper-middle class community that had been sending their children to independent and parochial schools. Parents in the WHS attendance zone had become disenchanted with the WHS; many parents and community leaders viewed the school both as chaotic ("Teachers had run this school"--Teacher No.) and as a students' drug haven. Lee diplomatically assessed community needs and concluded that WHS was potentially a private school community within a public school district. WHS always had had the ingredients for a good school: a hard working and well-trained faculty with a good grasp of the content areas; professionally successful parents with high expectations for schooling; and, students ready to learn and ambitious for attending our nation's better schools. Lee had to market his school to a constituency that logically preferred to save private school tuition expenses (his vision).

Strategically, Lee accomplished this marketing job by accomplishing four inter-related goals (improving student discipline, more efficient communication between administrators and teachers, better student school pride, and improved school-community relations). Tactically, Lee countered negative community perceptions of WHS. He made sure that all public performances were "first-class" (white cloth napkins at the honors banquet, high quality paper for diplomas). He promoted student achievement (e.g., community service) out in the community. Lee instituted a student dress code, had the school plant exterior painted, and set high

standards for his custodians to maintain a clean building. Lee used his considerable organizational and public relations skills to make others aware that Wells once again had become a top-flight preparatory school.

Of the four principals Lee appeared to have the closest relationship with his central office. He was the personal choice of the superintendent of this large metropolitan district. Lee's central office support consisted of teaching equipment, supplies, materials (according to Teachers No. 5 and 9). At no point during the interviews with Lee or the ten teachers, however, was active (daily or weekly consultation or political backing) from the central office mentioned. Lee understood that his superintendent would not meddle with WHS. Many community members perceived that parents used to run WHS (Teacher No. 5). The superintendent was not going to jeopardize himself politically. Lee had the autonomy to get control of the school, but he was on his own regarding how he did it.

Analytic Generalizations: Building A New Perspective on the High School Principalship

Two abstractions can be generalized across the cases. First, Burke, Brown, Jackson, and Lee did not enter these schools with visions in hand. As these principals assessed their situations and interacted with teachers and community leaders, their visions developed and evolved--as products of organization context. They assessed their situations and exploited opportunities in formulating roadmaps for their school improvement strategies and tactics. Visions provided a focus but not a blueprint meticulously detailed and faithfully followed over a five-year period. Goldman, Dunlap, and & Conley (1991) found that site-based visions can provide focus and priority to school improvement activities. This generalization also is supported by Rosenblum (1991): Principals in alternatively structured schools need

time to reflect, the resources, and changed relationships with teachers to create visions. Vision is not an isolated, "fixed" entity but a product of principals interacting with their environments and orchestrating consensus (Achilles, 1987).

Second, these principals were not cogs in a bureaucratic hierarchy who needed permission from superiors to act upon their visions. (Central office personnel were not interpreted in this study as playing influential roles in the formation of these visions.) The resources they received from their central offices cannot be interpreted as mandates, political backing or daily consultation. The four principals implemented their visions partly because they were able to "carve out" autonomy from their central offices (and sometimes from their school boards). This autonomy provided the flexibility to use appropriate strategies and tactics in implementing their context-driven vision. This generalization is supported by Louis and Miles's (1990) evolutionary or adaptive model. Successful principals are driven by vision and judgment, and not by rules and bureaucratic procedures; eschewing traditional long-range blueprints for change and improvement, these principals used school-based teams, cooperative tasks, and networks instead of hierarchical lines of authority.

If visions are site-specific (contextually driven) and if successful principals do carve out autonomy from central offices as they implement their visions, then we can challenge traditional assumptions of hierarchy and, indirectly, goal-setting at the macro-level (assumptions 1 and 3 of Astuto, Clark, and Polen, 1991). Were these principals unknowingly demonstrating shifts in power and influence leading to a new EA paradigm? Kuhn (1970) wrote that paradigm shifts are gradual conversions, or shifts in allegiance that take generations to occur. Successful principals (as demonstrated in this study) may be "pioneers of the new paradigm" (Barker, 1989, p. 36). As school systems decentralize and become "flatter organizations" (leaner

central offices and site-based management) these principals already have set aside traditional assumptions and outpaced their central offices--relics of an obsolete governance system.

Implications for Principal Recruitment/

Selection and Preparation

Although vision might be site-specific, the process of implementing visions was similar in the four cases. They understood the inter-related processes of curricula needs assessment, resource procurement, and encouraging certain teachers to assume new and challenging positions as "entrepreneurial program managers" (a data-grounded concept emerging from this study). These analytic tools may be a crucial criterion in recruiting and selecting principals.

Regarding the delivery of instruction, how much longer can we continue to present our knowledge base without using schools and their contexts--as well as university classrooms? EA professors and students together need to study schools as opportunities for critical thinking and reflection. Scheurick (1991, p. 8) suggested that traditional dissertations be replaced by "site-based collaborative action research projects...." This suggestion has merit, since school improvement visions are site-specific.

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